

# 'I heard a plane buzz us

CHARLES MCBETH

## Visalian was on first U.S. ship hit

By Eric Coyne  
Times-Delta

Charles McBeth remembers exactly what he was doing 54 years ago today when the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor began just before 8 a.m. — inspecting the anti-aircraft guns on board the *USS Oklahoma* battleship.

"I heard a plane buzz us and I asked a 3rd class gunner standing outside if it was an anti-aircraft drill," the 82-year-old Visalian recalled. "He said 'No, they're Japanese planes!' Then I felt a torpedo strike the *Oklahoma* — the first hit of the Pearl Harbor attack."

By day's end, two waves of Japanese planes had bombed and torpedoed eight battleships, three destroyers, three cruisers and four other vessels.

The Pearl Harbor attack catapulted the United States into World War II. It also left 2,403 Americans dead.

Casualties were heaviest aboard the *USS Arizona*, which sank after a bomb attack exploded its ammunition magazines, claiming the lives of 1,104 sailors and 73 marines.

Tied up on battleship row next to the *USS Maryland* near Ford Island and struck on the port side by several torpedoes, the *USS Oklahoma* capsized and sank within minutes.

The senior enlisted man in charge of *Oklahoma's* anti-aircraft gun batteries, McBeth handed another sailor a sledgehammer and told him to strike the locks off the magazines and bring up ammunition for the 3- and 5-inch guns.

"The magazines were five decks down and in the rear portion of the stern," McBeth said. "Normally I had 50 rounds up there for each of the 5-inch guns. But when we arrived in Pearl Harbor two days before the attack, the captain ordered us to put the ammunition down in the magazines."

"The other thing the captain did was order all the compartment doors opened because we were having an admiral's inspection . . .," said McBeth, who believes that decision caused the *Oklahoma* to rapidly take on water, roll over and sink.

"The ship rolled over so far I was able to literally walk down its side and climb into a motorboat," McBeth said. "I volunteered for duty on the *USS Blue* and went aboard that evening."

## Pearl Harbor: The catalyst that drew America into World War II:

Japan's conquest of Asia was already a decade old by 1941. Manchuria and China had already been invaded.

Japan's occupation of Indochina prompted the United States, Britain and the Netherlands to impose a trade embargo which cut back Japanese oil supplies by 90 percent.

Japan went after oil fields in the Dutch East Indies. To block interference, Tokyo tried to wipe out the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on Dec. 7, 1941.



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Charles McBeth,  
*USS Oklahoma*



Charles McBeth

McBeth was placed in charge of the destroyer's guns and served aboard the *Blue* in nine actions — including the Battle of Midway — until the ship was torpedoed on August 27, 1942, during the Guadalcanal attack.

"I'm probably the only guy in the world that had two ships sunk out from underneath him who didn't know how to swim," said McBeth, one of the last six people to leave the *Blue's* deck before it slipped under the sea. "After that, I was put in charge of naval ordnance at Sydney, Australia."

Then naval doctors discovered McBeth had tuberculosis and shipped him stateside. He spent most of 1943 hospitalized in Southern California. He left the Navy in 1944 and sold insurance

in the Bay area. A few years later, McBeth went into bulk animal-feed sales — a career he continued after moving to Visalia in 1965.

That same year, McBeth and a couple of other veterans organized the local chapter of the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association, with members in Tulare, Kings, Fresno and Madera counties. The group meets monthly, and members speak to schoolchildren and other interested parties often.

Last week, McBeth and fellow Visalia Pearl Harbor veteran

Bob McNutt spoke to students at George McCann Memorial Catholic School.

"We have 14 survivors in Tulare County," McBeth said. "Our motto is 'Remember Pearl Harbor: Keep America alert!'"